

## The skilled trades dilemma

**Students are clamouring for spots in community colleges while employers are desperate for trained workers. But Canadian schools are struggling to keep up with demands**

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Nova Scotia Community College in Halifax points to Mickey Doyle as a shining example of what Canada's community colleges can do to resolve one of the greatest challenges facing this country: giving men and women, especially the young, the skills that employers demand and need to fuel economic growth.

Mr. Doyle already had a bachelor of arts from Cape Breton University when he applied to NSCC's two-year mechanical engineering technology diploma course in 2005.

"The problem was that the BA didn't really equip me for a job," the 26-year-old recalls. "I didn't have any of the practical skills employers need."

Upon completing the course at NSCC, however, he was immediately snapped up as an estimator and planner with IMP Aerospace, which services civilian and military aircraft at its facility next to Halifax International Airport.

"I was hired even before graduation," Mr. Doyle says. "There were about 25 in my class, and as far as I can tell they all quickly got jobs as well."

Well-paid jobs, too, Mr. Doyle says; his annual starting salary is in the \$35,000-to-\$40,000 range.

Mr. Doyle's experience is not unique, says James Knight, president of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, based in Ottawa. Community college graduates equipped with instantly applicable, advanced skills are in extraordinarily high demand across Canada. Most colleges report that 92 per cent or more of their graduates find work within six months.

And yet, despite demand and impressive numbers of applicants, Canada's community colleges are falling behind in their ability to meet either current or future needs.

"We are facing major challenges right now," he says. "Providing people with the advanced skills needed for the construction trades is an example. About 15 per cent of all community college programs deal with construction.

"Projected demand is for 300,000 new construction jobs within the next 5 years, of which 50,000 will require the advanced skills we provide. The problem is we just can't meet demand."

Ken Webb, vice-president, academic and research at Red River College in Winnipeg, sees evidence of the problem every day. The waiting list for Red River's construction trades program is as long as three years for qualified applicants, he says, and the school has no way to easily expand its offerings.

In addition to 100 courses for its 10,000 full-time students and 120 for its 22,000 part-time students, Red River also offers 31 apprenticeship programs.

"We can bump up enrolment in courses centred around classroom learning, but not in those that require workshops or laboratories," Mr. Webb says. "Those courses are limited in size by the physical infrastructure available."

Unless the college can find money to build new workshops and labs, applicant demand will continue to outweigh the school's ability to meet industry's needs, he says.

Community colleges across Canada report similar situations. At Algonquin College in Ottawa the most popular courses often have three to four times as many applicants as there are spaces available, says Algonquin president Robert Gillett.

This year, for example, the business-marketing program could accommodate 215 students, but 971 applied. A policing program had room for 384 people, but drew 1,257 applications. And in business administration 1,616 people vied for 560 places.

The situation is similar in Nova Scotia, where NSCC has 10,500 full-time and 15,000 part-time students in its 114 courses.

"We took in 7,500 new students this fall but had to turn away another 2,000," says Joan McArthur-Blair, the school's president. "The future is of grave concern to us because by 2015, about 15,000 people will be leaving the work force through retirement while only 10,000 will be entering it.

"Almost all of them are going to need advanced skills to meet the changing nature of business today."

Canada indeed faces a quandary, says the ACCC's Mr. Knight. On the one hand, a shortage of skilled workers is ranked as one of the top challenges that business faces today, according to surveys by groups such as the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. On the other end of the pipeline, a growing number of community college applicants are not able to receive the practical training they seek.

What is needed, he says, is a co-ordinated national and provincial policy to finance the expansion of community colleges and their ability to meet demand.

"Just before the federal election, we got together with 20 industry trade associations to form the Investing for Skills Coalition," Mr. Knight says. "The goal was to raise public awareness of what is indeed a serious national problem and to attempt to persuade the political parties to include skills training as an integral part of their platforms."

The result was disappointing, Mr. Knight says.

"Every one of them said advances skills training was a top priority - even Prime Minister Stephen Harper - but none of them included it in their platform. All we can do now is to keep pressing.

"It is an issue Canada can't afford to ignore."